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Site-Sense

Introduction

The reading and understanding of ‘site’ is a fundamental component of an architect’s design process. The relationship between site and designer ultimately leads to the creation of the architectural proposal. A rich and thoughtful relationship with context can support the development of a unique, appropriate and relevant output.

Is it therefore appropriate to assume that learning how to develop this relationship is crucial to those engaged in the study of architecture, and if so how do we support students to acquire the skills to be able to fully and meaningfully engage with the ‘site survey’?

This paper explores the development of a multi-dimensional methodology and proposes a toolbox of skills, which students can draw upon to aid their understanding and registration of place exploring the poetic, prosaic and the technics of the site. Students will be challenged to be scientists, urban archaeologists and anthropologists as they engage with place beyond its surface and factual dimensions. These tools are designed to support students to experiment with recordings of both the factual and the temporal qualities of the context under examination, using a plethora of instruments from smart phones, sketchbooks, and their own bodies, and are encouraged to engage with the pragmatics as well as the poetics of that place through a number of open ended tasks. It is anticipated that a meaningful and confident approach to site analysis will support students in their design of proposals that are consequently intelligently and intrinsically connected to the place for which they have been proposed.

Ewing in her introduction in ‘Architecture and field/work’ describes the process ‘field/work may be seen as a form of critical realism’ and goes on to list the traditional components of the site survey process, ‘site visit, site survey, site analysis condition survey, setting out, snagging....’.¹

This may all sound reasonable but what is actually meant by tasks such as ‘site analysis’?

As a counterpoint to this Butterworth in her essay 'Of all we survey' is critical of what she terms as the 'conventional survey' and goes on to suggest that 'a genuine understanding of place entails making a personal commitment.'²

What is meant by a conventional survey is unclear but Butterworth's critique implies that she sees the gathering of pragmatic data to be in deficit in respect of a holistic reading of the site, and that a personal understanding that captures the temporal and poetic qualities is necessary.

We propose that an assured balance of both is absolutely crucial if one is to fully and holistically understand a place. Over time and with experience much of the experiential data will come with ease. Hawkes, in his book *The Environmental Imagination* discusses Zumthor's as being supported by the 'security of memory and experience, one might call this 'informed intuition''. But to get to that level of critical observation and registration many years of practice and a sensitivity to place is necessary.

Our own observations, firstly as students of architecture are that the 'site analysis' and what that meant in terms of activity, recording and analysis was never made explicit to us. Generally, a design brief was issued, a site given and off you went to complete the 'site survey'. This usually involved a camera, a tape measure and a sketchbook, but with no guidance or instruction about exactly what we should be recording or what to do with the gathered information. It was intuitive learning, which never received the same level of critique as the outcomes that were produced as a result.

And now secondly as architectural educators we are critical of the learning and teaching around this vital part of the process, observing that it is generally unstructured and often inadequate.

This paper explores the development of a methodology, which will support new students of architecture through the elusive site survey and equip them with a range of tools to observe, record register and communicate the multi layers of factual and experiential information gathered through this process.

What are we asking, or perhaps expecting from students when we send them out to site? Scratching the surface of the place is a good starting point, inhabiting, resting and registering the phenomena of the site seems an ideal place to begin.

"Observation is a dying art."³ Stanley Kubrick

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Kubrick's statement proposes that the art of observation is in decline and as architectural educators his statement rings true.

Architectural students must not only learn to actively observe, but they must do this within a framework that will result in recordings of these observations that have meaning, and which will in turn contribute to narratives and arguments in the development of design proposals. They must learn skills and develop the confidence to represent what they find through captured images, technical data, drawn representations, recorded ephemeral experiences, taxonomies of collections of found information and objects and in the construction of poetry and narratives. There is then a requirement to value what is worthy, and edit what has resulted from these observations, utilising the selected observations and findings as devices to develop meaningful work, which is connected to the spaces and places that the students have observed.

Site Analysis

'...unlike music, sculpture, film and literature, a construction (non-mobile) is intertwined with the experience of a place. The site (of a building) is more than a mere ingredient in its conception. It is its physical and metaphysical foundation'⁴

Steven Holl

To enable students to register a complete and holistic picture of the site or place it is necessary for them to compliment the scientific readings, the facts, with the 'feelings', this is what Butterworth calls 'a personal commitment'. This requires the students to approach the site with an open mind and body to allow absorption of the invisible qualities to be made alongside the visible aspect of that site.

Site analysis is often seen as a recording of fixed phenomenon of the place under observation, but there are many layers of such phenomenon. The acknowledgment of both the tangible and intangible data is crucial in the acquisition of a complete picture.

Raoul Bunschoten of CHORA Architects describes this as 'two skins'. The first being the natural world, the earth, ground, sea on which we live. He refers to this as the first skin. The second skin is the way we live on the world, the skin of houses, cars, cities and information. He goes on to say 'Our second skin and first skin are both dynamic and they interact with each other and I think on any site that you go to, you always have to understand the relationship between the two skins'.⁵

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In the construction of the commitment, or relationship with the place and its phenomenon the designer's own imagination is stimulated and analysis of the findings becomes relevant in the context of the continuing design process. Emotion and Imagination is the title of a chapter within Pallasmaa's book 'The Thinking Hand'⁶. He discusses 'the gift of imagination;' and goes on to state that 'we would defiantly not use our hands meaningfully without being able to imagine the results of our action'. He discussed this observation in the context of an overwhelming flood of images both uncategorised and without meaning; in Calvino's words 'an unending rainfall of images'⁷ and urges us to consider that an architecture of reality will connects us to the real, physical, world in which we are placed.

Dean Hawkes addresses the continued consideration of the architect's imagination in relationship to environment within the buildings that are being designed. In his book 'The Environmental Imagination'⁸ he describes the process of the architect as he or she imagines the environment and atmosphere and ambience of their proposed building and proposes that 'the technics are brought to bear in the service of the poetics'. Taking this into consideration alongside Butterworth's 'personal commitment' confirms that a revision on what we have called in the past 'site analysis' is necessitous to a thoughtful and useful registration of place. These separate yet complimentary concerns further support our observations and the desire to construct a methodology for students to work with that will address both the physical and the personal, that is to say the facts and the feelings.

Each author has currently been working independently on developing site registration techniques that align with their own research interests, this paper reports on the bringing together of these approaches in the construction of a more complete analysis process.

The Pragmatic

Survey: 'the act of examining and recording the measurements, features, etc. of an area of land in order to make a map or plan of it'

It has long been a problem for students to fully engage with a site and with the digital age it is becoming more apparent that there is a tendency to rely on visual aids like google maps and street view to gather knowledge of a site as opposed to physically interacting with the site. There is also always a question of how to analysis and process the information gathered.

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A selected group of Stage 1 students from the Mackintosh School of Architecture were tasked with testing an alternative to the traditional site survey whilst in Ardrishaig, a small village on the west coast of Scotland on the edge of Loch Gilp. The students were asked to explore the nature of the existing context and its environs. This short 2 day project was intended to elicit creative awareness of the rural landscape and an understanding of the physical and spatial context of the village of Ardrishaig and its unique relationship to its spectacular surroundings.

The alternative site survey resulted in the students being tasked with taking part in a series of scientific and environmental explorations over a 24 hour period. Through the students engagement with this scientific data gathering which included temperature readings, humidity readings, direct solar exposure readings, directional noise readings, surface temperature reading and wind speed and direction readings, it increased their understanding of place two fold. Firstly they gained specific knowledge of the elements that they had been observing and recording. Secondly through the act of recording and collating data they achieved a deeper and more subtle understanding of the site and the locale.

It was found that when rooting the 'site survey' and data recording in science it became more quantifiable for the student and also much clearer as there was no ambiguity to the readings. There were questions that arose due to anomalies in the data recorded but this only added to the final understanding of the site as it forced the student to check and recheck the data and observe their surroundings to fully understand and explain any rogue recordings. It became clear that by the necessity to understand and articulate these exceptional readings the student was able to engage with the site at a more basic level and that this in turn aided the design process.

It is felt that the act of data gathering not only allows the student to understand a site through the prism of an unquestionable set of numbers but it also allows them time and space to immerse themselves in a place and through the undertaking of specific tasks gives them the ability to sustain interest in an area for longer and as a result benefits their understanding of a site.

The Poetic

The 'facts' of the site, whilst often time consuming to gather, are less emotionally onerous to collect than the poetics. The additional challenge of registering the invisible and how to visually record the findings and experiences so that they can be re-visited during the editing process of the analysis, and if relevant, shared and discussed as part of the design process. Zumthor in his book 'Atmospheres' describes what he calls the 'Magic of the Real'⁹ and recounts notes from his sketch book that he made whilst sitting in the sunshine in a square on Maudy Thursday in 2003. He articulates not only

what he sees but what he hears, the sun and the shade, the movement of the air, and how people inhabit the place. He is essentially carrying out an analysis of that place but not through measurement data but through observation made as a human resting within that place.

To support students to development of a multi- dimensional methodology in their consideration atmosphere within site, place and architecture, and subsequently within their own proposals, two opportunities have been introduced into the Diploma programme at Glasgow School of Art. Both allow time to explore and experiment with methods to do this and time to elicit the confidence in those involved to recognize that what they feel has relevance and value. The first of these is a 10-week PG taught elective titled Sense—Space, and the second is a one day Diploma workshop of the same name. To begin the process students are challenged to confront the invisible though an existing piece of architecture. The thinking being that they will more comfortable in embarking on this emotional process through the reading of their bodily responses within a chosen and respected building or an area of urban realm. Following this a number of sense specific tasks are given. All are designed to encourage the students to connect with their intuition when exploring the world. Poetry and narratives are written, videos produced, smell maps created and sound-scapes recorded, all capturing the ephemeral qualities of place and space and how humans reside and use the spaces under observation. Whilst not initially site specific the results show a deeper registration of their bodies in the world as they read and record the diversities of place through the capturing of sounds, smells, touch, temperature, light and shade.

An Experiment

Facts and Feelings

The experiment that has been designed will try to elicit the pros and cons for both types of site survey; firstly the facts and secondly the feelings, and allow comparisons between each method to be made. The intension is to draw on the findings of this experiment to develop a meaningful multi layered site analysis process which can be implemented within the design studios in the forthcoming academic session. The hope being that design work will be enriched by the gathering of relevant and diverse data which can be utilised to support the design process. Two groups will be challenged to independently explore the phenomena of the environment of a chosen site. One group will use instruments to record the facts on the site; the other will use their bodies to absorb sensual registering's of the place...the feelings. This documenting of the site will inform their response to that place ahead of a hypothetical design proposal. The experiment will not require the development of proposals as it is an exploration into the development of a site analysis methodology that is the purpose of the experiment. To try and ensure that the evidence/data is comparable each group will be directed to carry out their separate registrations at the same time , however, each group will work independently. The aim being that the resulting presentations of site data gathered will allow comparisons to be made, thus allowing any conclusions drawn by each group

regarding the pros and cons of each approach as well as any unexpected readings and observations.

FACT

“The goal is to turn data into information, and information into insight.” ¹⁰ Carley Fiorina, former CEO, Hewlett-Packard Co.

The FACT survey team will be challenged to use a mobile recording instrument station (provided by MEARU) to register measurable data from the site – sound, light levels together with temperature and other physical phenomena, this can be recorded accurately with the equipment provide. Once collected the team will be asked to prepare a presentation that demonstrates their findings and reading of the site with a view to it being develop as per the hypothetical design brief.

FEELING

‘Look around you...Feel the wind, smell the air. Listen to the birds and watch the sky. Tell me what's happening in the wide world.’ ¹¹
Nancy Farmer, The Sea of Trolls.

Unlike the Fact group, the readings of the site will be done through the registration of phenomena by the bodies of the team. The team will be asked to use their individual sense receptors – eyes, ears, nose, mouth and skin to absorb information about how they feel in the space we are in. Make notes and drawings of what they register of both the tangible and intangible. Once collected, they will also be asked to prepare a presentation that demonstrates their findings and reading of the site with a view to it being developed as per the hypothetical design brief that proposes a temporary performance venue for an annual open air festival.

Conclusion

The core of this paper deals with the acquisition of skills to equip students to fully and meaningfully engage with the ‘site survey’ issues, based on the belief that this relationship is crucial in the study of architecture, and the production of proposals which are sensitive and grounded to their context.

Currently the experiment laid out in the paper is waiting to be trialed by a group of students so drawing a conclusion at this early stage is not yet possible.

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The use and successes of each of the independent methodology described through the separate survey techniques have been made and the results have been shared, thus allowing the development of a hybrid methodology to be constructed. This new survey method will endeavor to ensure that the students involved have a meaningful and appropriate dialogue with the sites which they will be challenged to design proposals for, one that is fun and engaging and leads to personal and factual data that is in the unquestionable ownership of each student participant.

The development of this holistic survey proposal is currently in a testing stage, but once launched we will be in a position to reflect and refine as we develop the methodology; and through iteration will develop a process for the students to adopt that will connect them to the site and places they are exploring and facilitate registering beyond the visual; equipping those involved with a plethora of tools to garner a deeper understanding and relevant knowledge of the site under scrutiny. The desired outcome being that this will in time result in proposals which will be deeply rooted to their context and have appropriate narratives to connect them to that place.

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